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# ***Broderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Post-conflict Nicaragua***

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Dennis Rodgers



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## ***Broderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Post-conflict Nicaragua***

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### Abstract:

This paper explores various ways in which gang members in post-conflict Nicaragua have internalized and put into practice a range of violent behaviour patterns over the past two decades. It shows how different types of gang violence can be related to distinct forms of socialization, tracing how these particular articulations have changed over time, often for very contingent reasons. As such, the paper highlights the need to conceive the socialization of violence within gangs as a dynamic and contextualized process, and suggests drawing on the notion of “repertoire” as a means of meaningfully representing this.

### About the author:

Dennis Rodgers is Professor of Urban Social and Political Research at the University of Glasgow. A social anthropologist by training, he specialises in the interdisciplinary study of conflict and violence, governance, planning, and the politics of inequality and has conducted extensive participatory research on these topics in Nicaragua, Argentina, and India. He has held research and teaching positions in the Brooks World Poverty Institute (University of Manchester) and at the London School of Economics, and is also associated with the Centre for Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, and the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi. He is Editor of the journal *Urban Studies*.

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## ***Broderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Post-conflict Nicaragua***

### **Introduction**

As Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007: 85) have remarked, “few studies have examined how violent norms are transmitted in street gangs”. Although there exists a significant corpus of scholarly literature exploring why individuals join gangs, most of this generally tends to assume either that youth who join gangs are violent by nature, or else – somewhat tautologically – that a gang member will automatically engage in violence because a gang is a violent institution. The internalization of norms and process of learning how to engage in particular activities and practices are by no means obvious or predetermined, however. Certainly, there exists a long tradition of anthropological research highlighting how such processes of “socialization” can occur through a range of mechanisms that can vary significantly across both time and space (see e.g. Mead, 1928; Fortes, 1938). Socialization is moreover a phenomenon that is fundamentally polysemic in nature, inevitably relating simultaneously to several different dimensions of social life, which makes capturing its underlying dynamics all the more difficult.

Drawing on ongoing longitudinal ethnographic research with gang members in a poor neighbourhood called *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,<sup>1</sup> in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, this paper explores various ways in which they have assimilated and put into practice a range of violent behaviour patterns over the past two decades. It shows how different types of violence can be related to distinct forms of socialization, tracing how these particular articulations have changed over time, often for very contingent reasons. As such, the paper highlights the need to conceive the socialization of violence within gangs as a dynamic and contextualized process, and suggests drawing on the notion of “repertoire” as a means of meaningfully representing this. The paper begins with an overview of major approaches to conceptualizing what might be termed “gang socialization”, before presenting a brief history of Nicaraguan gang violence, focusing on the post-conflict period (i.e. after 1990). It then offers some methodological background before

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym, as are all the names of places and people mentioned in this paper.

describing different forms of gang socialization in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and their evolution over time, before concluding with some reflections about the general nature of socialization processes.

## Theorising gang socialization

Broadly speaking, there exist three major approaches to explaining gang violence. The first sees the phenomenon as linked to the individual personality traits of gang members. To this extent, it is something considered innate rather than socialized. Such approaches range from basically viewing gang members as psychopaths – see Yablonsky (1963), for example – to seeing them as representative of particular psycho-social archetypes, such as “defiant individualism” (Sánchez Jankowski, 1991), for instance. Although this conception of gang violence is the one that probably coincides most closely to popular understandings of gangs and gang members, it is clearly a rather self-serving approach, and no serious research has ever convincingly shown that gang members consistently display any particular personality type (see Covey, 2003). Moreover, for every gang member who might plausibly be categorised as a psychopath or a “defiant individual”, there are more often than not at least an equal if not a greater number of non-gang members displaying the same personality type within any given context.

The second major approach to gang socialization sees violence as a corollary of group dynamics. This makes sense considering that socialization is at its most basic a process whereby an individual is assimilated into a collective. The gang group – that is to say, the gang as a communal unit – is conceived as the source of socialization, shaping members’ sense of self and identity, including with regard to the internalization of particular norms and practices. The question, however, is how this actually takes place beyond simply joining the gang. This is by no means necessarily obvious. In his foundational study of early twentieth-century Chicago gangs, Thrasher (1927: 29–30) for example famously argued that their violence was the result of “spontaneous play-groups” acquiring “group-consciousness” through “opposition” to “a rival or an enemy”, and transforming into “conflict groups”. Such an assertion has been widely repeated by gang scholars in numerous contexts over the years – see Suttles (1968), Lepoutre (1997), or

Jensen (2008), for instance – yet Thrasher’s observation arguably applies to any competitive sports team, and he never explains in any detail what it is about “opposition” that makes gang members violent, or how they actually learn to be violent from a practical point of view (insofar as fighting requires certain skills that are neither innate nor intuitive).

The final way in which gang violence is explained within the literature is contextually. This is perhaps best illustrated by Vigil’s (1988, 2002 and 2003: 230) idea of “street socialization”, which he developed to describe situations where “the streets...become the arena for what is learned and expected by [youth] to gain recognition and approval”. In many ways Vigil’s (2002: 10) starting point is a lack of socialization: “street socialization fills the voids left by inadequate parenting and schooling, especially inadequate familial care and supervision....On the streets, the person acquires the models and means for new norms, values, and attitudes”. The latter collectively correspond to what Anderson (1999: 33) has termed the “code of the street”, “at the heart of [which] is the issue of respect – loosely defined as being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves”. In the “poor inner-city black communit[ies]” in Philadelphia that Anderson (1999: 32) studied, where pervasive despair has spawned “an oppositional culture”, respect can best be secured through “the use of violence”. Gangs, from this perspective, are the epitome of this “code” due to their intimate spatial association with “the street”.

In other words, gang violence is something that is “learned and practiced” as a consequence of living in the streets (Vigil, 2003: 230). Having said this, while there is no doubt that gangs can be linked to broader processes such as poverty, discrimination, exclusion, or “social disorganisation”, for example, generally invoking contextual circumstances to account for their violence fails to explain why only a minority of youth – generally less than 10 percent within any given context (Vigil, 1988: 422) – ever join a gang and become regularly involved in violence. Contextual factors by their very nature impact on all those living within a given context, and Anderson’s study of the “code of the street” illustrates repeatedly that it is a way of acting that is by no means specific to gangs. The idea of “street socialization” moreover also implicitly assimilates violence with gang membership in a rather static, almost binary manner. Indeed, Vigil (2002: 12) argues that it is a process that “alienates” youth from other vectors for



socialization due to its exclusive and all-encompassing nature; the notion that street youth absorb street norms and practices and become violent gang members is therefore presented very much as a singular experience. However, as Ayling (2011) has pointed out, gangs are generally highly volatile social institutions, and their internal dynamics tend to evolve often very significantly over any given time period.

Another way of putting this is by saying that gang socialization should be viewed as a process rather than an event, and that it can potentially involve several different elements, ranging from the individual to the contextual. This significantly affects how the issue might be approached most fruitfully. In particular, following Lancaster's (1992: 281) contention about the best way to apprehend the workings of Nicaraguan *machismo*, rather than attempting to "get...down to the bottom of things" by establishing a series of determinations", it is potentially more insightful to explore how different factors "intertwine" to shape different outcomes. In the case of gang socialization, we need to pay attention to the way that features such as individual personality traits or experiences, group dynamics, and contextual circumstances come together to shape both collective gang and individual gang member trajectories, as well as how particular forms of "intertwining" can lead to the assimilation of particular norms and practices in specific ways, as well as how this intertwining can change over time due to both endogenous and exogenous factors. Only in this way are we likely to truly get to grips with the variable logic of gang socialization, and properly contextualize it within a broader understanding of the workings of social action.

## **A brief history of Nicaraguan gang violence**

Nicaragua has long been associated with violence, to the extent that Rushdie (1987: 18) famously described the country as having endured "a continuous rite of blood". Certainly, it is notorious for having suffered the longest-running dictatorship in modern Latin American history, that of the Somoza dynasty, which was finally overthrown after 45 years of bitter struggle in 1979 by the famous *Sandinista* revolution. Although the new revolutionary regime promulgated a range of social programmes that benefitted the majority of the country's population for the first time in Nicaraguan history, the triumph of the revolution led to a bitter civil war against the US-

sponsored “*Contras*”.<sup>2</sup> This conflict had a devastating effect on the country’s economy, destroying and disrupting communication and economic infrastructure, and terrorizing and demoralizing the population, particularly in the countryside. More than 30,000 people – almost 1 per cent of the country’s population – were killed, and the war was a primary reason for the *Sandinista* revolutionary regime’s electoral defeat in February 1990 (Walker, 2003: 56).

Rather than leading to peace, post-conflict regime change marked a shift in Nicaragua’s geography of violence, the logic of which was well summarized by Galeano (1998: 322–24), who remarked that “while the streets of Nicaragua’s cities were peaceful during the years of formal conflict, once peace was declared, the country’s streets became scenes of war” as a result of a dramatic explosion in urban crime and delinquency.<sup>3</sup> According to official Nicaraguan National Police statistics, crime levels rose steadily by an annual average of more than 10 per cent during the 1990s, compared to less than 2 per cent during the 1980s, with the absolute number of crimes almost quadrupling between 1990 and 2000. Crimes against persons – including homicides, rapes, and assaults – increased especially significantly (Cajina, 2000: 185–87).

While this overall trend of increasing urban crime in the post-conflict period is undoubtedly accurate, official Nicaraguan crime statistics are deeply problematic. The inefficiency and weakness of Nicaraguan state institutions<sup>4</sup> clearly affects their reporting capacity,<sup>5</sup> and official crime statistics are also unquestionably manipulated,<sup>6</sup> as successive post-revolutionary governments have sought to project Nicaragua as “the safest country in Latin

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<sup>2</sup> The term “*Contras*” comes from the Spanish word “*Contrarevolucionarios*” (“Counter-revolutionaries”).

<sup>3</sup> Although armed groups of ex-Sandinista Popular Army military personnel and Contra guerrillas continued to plague rural areas in the north of the country well into the 1990s, these were generally local in scope and never constituted a major threat to the Nicaraguan state (see Rocha, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Since 1990, a process of de-politicization and reductions in both size and budget have severely affected the operational capacity of the Nicaraguan National Police, which has limited patrolling capacity and is completely absent in 21 per cent of the country’s 146 municipalities (Cajina, 2000: 174).

<sup>5</sup> The Pan American Health Organization estimates that more than 50 per cent of all mortalities in Nicaragua in 1995 were not registered due to deficient record keeping by hospitals and morgues (PAHO, 1998: 384).

<sup>6</sup> There are, for example, marked discrepancies between Nicaraguan police statistics and those of other organizations, including the International Criminal Police Organization. The latter recorded that 1,157 homicides were “known to the police” in Nicaragua in 1998, compared to official figures of 381 homicides and 180 assassinations (INTERPOL, 1999; Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, 2000: 34).

America”, partly in order to attract foreign investment.<sup>7</sup> All post-1990 governments in Nicaragua, but especially those of Enrique Bolaños (2002–06) and Daniel Ortega (2006– ), have attempted to project successfully fighting crime and insecurity as a major element of their political action; consequently, they have generally preferred to release “positive” – that is, low – crime statistics.<sup>8</sup> The problem is particularly evident with regard to homicide statistics.

Poor official statistics notwithstanding, ethnographic studies carried out in the past two decades or so confirm crime and delinquency as critical social concerns in urban Nicaragua (see e.g. Bolognesi, 2009; Rocha, 2007a; Rodgers, 2000, 2006a, 2007b; and Vermeij, 2006). Gangs are frequently described as the major source of insecurity in these investigations, and they have also regularly been identified as such in various Nicaraguan opinion polls on the topic. A 1999 survey conducted by the Nicaraguan NGO *Ética y Transparencia*, for example, found that 50 per cent of respondents identified gangs as the principal threat to their personal security (Cajina, 2000: 177). More than a decade later, the 2011 Citizen Security Perception Survey carried out by the Managua-based Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy<sup>9</sup> found that almost 60 per cent of respondents considered gangs the most important security threat in Nicaragua (Orozco, 2012: 8). More generally, the Nicaraguan media regularly carries numerous reports of gangs being involved not only in a range of petty crimes, including theft and mugging, but also in armed robbery and murder.<sup>10</sup>

Gangs are by no means new features of Nicaraguan society. They can be traced back to the country’s large-scale urbanization, when Managua grew from some 50,000 inhabitants in 1940 to more than 250,000 in 1963 (Kates *et al.*, 1973: 982). These first gangs were however little more than spontaneous groups of youths that emerged organically in urban slums and only lasted as long as the specific peer group underpinning them stayed together. Certainly, they were

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<sup>7</sup> This association is explicitly made in many of former president Enrique Bolaños’ speeches, including for example the one delivered to the Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America on 9 May 2002 (Bolaños, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> This approach has sometimes led officials to contradict themselves, as when they prioritize crime suppression despite official data suggesting that the problem is not significant, while simultaneously proclaim the country to be safer than the rest of Central America but make citizen security a key policy focus (see GoN, 2002a; 2002b).

<sup>9</sup> Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that media reporting on crime and insecurity is of course not necessarily accurate, particularly in Nicaragua (see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz, 2009).

never prominent, to the extent that gangs are not mentioned at all in Téfel Vélez's (1976) seminal study of urban poverty in late 1960s and early 1970s Nicaragua, for example. The number of gangs declined significantly in Nicaragua during the 1980s due to universal military service – the age of conscription being 16 – and also because of the highly developed grassroots organization that was a hallmark of the *Sandinista* revolution, which included youth work brigades and extensive local neighbourhood watches.

Gangs disappeared almost completely from view during the first half of the 1980s, before beginning to re-emerge from 1987 onwards due to the war-fuelled erosion of the *Sandinista* welfare state, declining levels of local organization, the decreasing legitimacy of the revolutionary regime, and increasing numbers of youths deserting their military service (Lancaster, 1992: 132). These new gangs principally involved groups of young men<sup>11</sup> who had been conscripted together and who joined forces in order to protect their families and friends from the rising crime and insecurity, thereby displaying something of a vigilante ethos. From the early 1990s onwards, gangs began to proliferate exponentially as a result of peace and mass demobilisation, becoming a ubiquitous feature of poor urban neighbourhoods in all of the country's major cities. By 1999, the Nicaraguan National Police estimated that there were 110 gangs incorporating 8,500 youths in Managua, double the number recorded in 1996, and five times that documented in 1990 (Rodgers, 2006a: 273).<sup>12</sup> These figures are undoubtedly underestimates,<sup>13</sup> but they do provide a sense of the growth of the phenomenon in the first decade of the post-revolutionary period.

By the mid-1990s, a full-blown gang culture had become institutionalized in Nicaragua's major urban centres. Gang members engaged in a wide range of petty delinquency, while rival gangs collectively fought each other for control over territory, in particular their local neighbourhoods, but also adjacent no-man's lands, roads, and other public spaces. These

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<sup>11</sup> Although female gang members are not completely unknown in Nicaragua, they are not the norm (see Rodgers, 2006a: 286).

<sup>12</sup> By comparison, Managua's population reportedly grew by just under 4 per cent between the 1995 and 2005 censuses, from 903,100 to 937,085 (GoN, 2006: 26).

<sup>13</sup> Although it is not clear whether he defined gangs in the same way as the police, Núñez (1996: 245–50) recorded the existence of a total of 13 *pandillas* just in the two Managua *barrios* San Luis and Altagracia in the early 1990s. At that time, both of these were relatively typical examples of poor urban neighbourhoods in the city, which had more than 400 such neighbourhoods.

conflicts principally revolved around protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants from rival gangs; due to their fixed nature and their adherence to processes of regular escalation, they arguably provided a measure of predictability within an otherwise chaotic and highly insecure broader social context. In that sense, this new wave of gangs may be seen as having continued the original vigilante ethos of the first post-war generation, despite gang membership turnover due to gang members “maturing out” between the ages of 19 and 22 (Rocha, 2000a; 2000b; Rodgers, 2006a; 2007a).

Gangs changed radically in nature around the turn of the century, however. In particular, they shifted from displaying solidarity with their local neighbourhood communities and offering localized forms of protection and social order to being much more parochial, predatory, and feared organizations. This shift was largely linked to the spread of cocaine in Nicaragua. The drug began to move through the country in substantial quantities from 1999 onwards,<sup>14</sup> and its consumption in the form of crack rapidly became a major element of gang culture. Although gang members in the early and mid-1990s did consume drugs, cocaine was practically unknown then, and they mainly smoked marijuana or sniffed glue. Unlike those drugs, however, crack makes its users extremely aggressive, violent, and unpredictable; its consumption thus led to a rise in spontaneous, random attacks by addicted gang members looking to obtain money for their next fix. Contrary to the past, these gang members actively targeted local residents, generating a widespread and tangibly heightened sense of fear in urban neighbourhoods in Managua and other Nicaraguan cities, including Chinandega, Diriamba, and Estelí, starting from around 2000. In other words, crack consumption fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between gangs and their local communities (Rocha, 2007a).

In some neighbourhoods, gang members integrated into the emergent Nicaraguan drug economy as street dealers, further increasing insecurity in those areas. For the most part, dealers worked independently, selling irregularly on street corners in their neighbourhood and sourcing their crack cocaine from one of a small number of neighbourhoods in the city, where it was being distributed initially by individuals on a rather *ad hoc* basis (Rodgers, 2010). Distributors were often ex-gang members who drew on their historical links to their local gang to enrol current

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<sup>14</sup> On the reasons for this particular trend, see Rodgers (2006a: 278–79).

members as their security apparatus. In these neighbourhoods, gang activities shifted from territorial protection to ensuring the proper functioning of the drug economy, which they achieved by collectively imposing local regimes of terror that went far beyond the more diffuse crack consumption-related violence. In order to reduce the risk of denunciation, these drug-dealing gangs created a climate of chronic fear by repeatedly threatening and instrumentally committing arbitrary acts of violence against community inhabitants. At the same time, gang wars ceased because these would have impeded potential clients from coming to buy drugs (Rodgers, 2006a; 2007b; Rocha, 2007a).

From the beginning of the twenty-first century – but most visibly around 2005 – the number of *pandillas* (gangs) in Nicaraguan cities began to decline, even disappearing completely in some neighbourhoods (Rocha, 2007a). The trend was attributable partly to the atomizing effect of crack consumption and partly to the emergence of more professional drug-dealing groups, often referred to as *cartelitos* (little cartels).<sup>15</sup> These groups generally involved individuals from several different neighbourhoods, and even different parts of Nicaragua. *Cartelitos* imposed localized regimes of terror on their local communities, brutally repressing local gangs to prevent them from becoming challengers. This violence reached a peak around 2009–10, after which it eased up significantly as many *cartelitos* either fell apart due to internecine fighting or were taken over by rivals. Those that remained began to reduce their involvement in local drug dealing and refocused on drug trafficking, largely in the hopes of making much higher profits. Instead of dominating local communities, *cartelito* members began to minimize their visibility, which led to improvements in local security in the urban

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<sup>15</sup> Changing patterns of urban policing also affected the Nicaraguan gang panorama, particularly in Managua. During the early and mid-1990s, the police rarely entered poor urban neighbourhoods, largely in view of the fact that the violence there remained localized and tended not to spill over into richer areas, but also because gangs frequently out-gunned the police (Hernández, 2001). From the late 1990s until about 2005, however, the drug business led to gang violence spreading throughout the city. To contain this growth, the police began to implement what might be termed “spectacular” policing, entering poor neighbourhoods in an arbitrary and intimidating manner, heavily armed and wearing riot gear, and more often than not specifically targeting youth (Rodgers, 2006b). This approach led to a decline in gangs in some neighbourhoods, but increasing engagement with drug dealers in others. The police was initially confrontational but rapidly became accommodating, with some *cartelitos* even paying corrupt police officers to bust rival drug-dealing groups as they jostled for market domination (see Dudley, 2012). Predominant patterns of policing changed again around 2005, partly as a result of the institutionalization of corruption between some *cartelitos* and the police. In Managua, policing became more indirect in response to the conclusion of a range of urban infrastructural developments that isolated poor neighbourhoods; police now principally patrolled roads surrounding slums and poor neighbourhoods – rather than the poor areas themselves (see Rodgers, 2004; 2012).

neighbourhoods where they had previously operated. While drug dealing continues to be widespread in Nicaraguan cities, it has become much smaller in scale, disorganized, and more individualized, although those engaging in it are often gang members or ex-gang members.

Gangs continue to be a feature of many poor urban neighbourhoods in present-day Nicaragua, but not to the same degree as during the 1990s and the early years of the following decade. There is however evidence that a new generation of territorial gangs is emerging, as well as new armed actors. Media reports and recent high-profile drug-trafficking cases suggest that the *cartelitos*' monopoly over trafficking routes in Nicaragua are coming to an end, not least because Colombian and Mexican cartels may be encroaching upon them.<sup>16</sup> In 2010, Nicaragua saw the first drug cartel execution-style killings, which were widely blamed on Mexican contract killers (Quintero, 2010a; 2010b). Towards the end of 2011 the Nicaraguan government deployed 1,000 soldiers into the Nicaraguan countryside (Stone, 2011). The troops were ostensibly meant to deal with gangs – even though gangs are a fundamentally urban phenomenon; their more likely goal was to address the increasing territorialization of drug-trafficking groups in the northern Caribbean region (Romero, 2010). How this development might affect the potential re-emergence of gangs and the broader political economy of violence in Nicaragua remains to be seen, but one thing that can be said is that over the past two decades the logic and dynamics of Nicaraguan gangs have evolved quite radically, and logically, this means that processes of gang socialization will have likewise also changed, as is explored in more detail below.

## Some methodological background

The empirical material presented below is drawn from ongoing longitudinal ethnographic research that began in 1996. My focus on gangs was largely accidental, contingent on the fact that during my first couple of months in Nicaragua I suffered several violent encounters with gangs and then subsequently moved – for completely serendipitous reasons – into a neighbourhood – *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández – that happened to have a particularly notorious local gang. Both of these experiences firmly fixed my attention on gangs as a topic of investigation and set the tone for my research. In particular, as a result of a series of perhaps

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<sup>16</sup> See Fox (2012) and O'Neill McCleskey (2012).

somewhat unlikely events, within a few weeks of directing my investigative attentions towards gangs, I ended up actually being initiated into the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang. During the course of the subsequent 10 months, I was able to carry out extensive participant observation with the gang, spending significant amounts of my time hanging out with gang members on street corners and in their homes, smoking, drinking, chatting, as well as participating in a range of gang activities, both violent and non-violent (see Rodgers, 2007b, for more details).

Becoming a gang member obviously provided me with an incredible research opportunity.<sup>17</sup> I was able to rapidly familiarise myself with gang norms, codes, and behaviour patterns, and it gave me extensive access to gang members, and allowed for open and frank interviews that were not clouded by fear or mistrust (on either side). I was able to hear from gang members what it was that had motivated them to join the gang, how they perceived themselves, as well as obtain extensive details about their delinquent activities. I was able to compare their discourses against their everyday practices, as well as observe individuals acting in a range of different circumstances, including some that would normally have been impossible for a non-gang member to observe. More generally, I engaged in what Wacquant (2004: viii) has termed “carnal ethnography”, experiencing – obviously only up to a point, within the limits of my particular standpoint as a foreigner and an anthropologist – a “moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation” (or put another way, I was socialized into the gang, one might say...).

The fact that I joined the gang also provided the foundation for my longitudinal research. Although I formally “retired” from the gang when I left Nicaragua in July 1997, and the gang changed significantly between my departure and my return in 2002, I was trusted as an “old timer”, and gang members continued to be willing to exchange and to share details about their illegal activities, including in particular their emergent drug dealing. This continued to be the case during my subsequent visits in 2003, 2007, 2009, and 2012, despite gang member turnover, although it became obvious during the latter visit that the newest generation of gang members – all of whom were born after my first visit to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández – were less comfortable being interviewed. In a related manner, they also began to call me “*Don Dennis*”

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that gang members knew that I was carrying out research about them.



.rather than just “Dennis” on my last trip. While this is an inevitable corollary of the temporal dimension of longitudinal research – aging is a relational process – I will admit that I found it slightly wounding to my self-esteem to have gone from “*broder*” to “*Don*” (so to speak)....

As my research has progressed, I have spent less time carrying out participant observation with the gang – particularly compared to my first two visits in 1996–1997 and 2002 – and have increasingly focused on carrying out more purposeful one-on-one interviews, with both new and old gang members. This is partly due to the generally shorter durations of my return visits – which have lasted one to two months, compared to the twelve months that I spent in Nicaragua in 1996–97 – but it is also because from my second visit onwards I began to engage in regular “repeat interviews”, initially with gang members whom I first interviewed in the 1996–97, but subsequently with others whom I interviewed during later visits. In addition to carrying out one-off formal interviews with 53 gang members between 1996 and 2012, I have repeatedly interviewed sixteen more, seven since my first visit in 1996–97, two since 2002, two since 2003, two since 2007, and three since 2009.<sup>18</sup> This has been particularly valuable in providing me with a more dynamic picture of the gang’s evolving social practices, more specifically with regard to the existence of continuities over time, which is something that “snapshot” ethnography is often prone to missing.<sup>19</sup>

## **Gang socialization in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández**

*Barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández is a poor urban neighbourhood located in southeast Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. The locality was originally founded as an illegal squatter community by rural–urban migrants in the early 1960s, one of many such informal settlements that mushroomed on the edge of Managua at that time. Due to its inhabitants’ extreme poverty, the settlement was initially known as *La Sobrevivencia* (Survival), but was completely rebuilt

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<sup>18</sup> To these must also be added hundreds of hours of more informal conversation and interaction with gang members past and present, as well as extensive observation – both participant and otherwise – and over 100 interviews about gangs with non-gang member inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.

<sup>19</sup> The fact that I have been able to record my interviews since 2002 has moreover meant that I have also been able to play back past discussions to interviewees several years later, which has frequently provoked very interesting reflexive insights, particularly when their interpretations of past events differ significantly from the accounts originally recorded.

during the early 1980s as a result of a *Sandinista* state housing development project, and renamed *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández (after a local “martyr of the Revolution”), although socio-economically it remained in the lowest quartile of Managua neighbourhoods. The settlement has always been infamous for its criminality. It was widely known as “*un barrio de tamales*” (a neighbourhood of thieves) during the 1960s and 1970s, but became extremely notorious in the early 1990s due to the emergence of a very brutal local gang. This bad reputation has persisted into the present, although the gang has changed significantly over the past two decades, even effectively disappearing completely during the latter half of the 2000s.

Broadly speaking, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s evolution in the post-conflict period can be divided into five phases, each predominantly associated with different forms of violence, as summarised in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Gang evolution phases in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, 1989–2012**

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Predominant form of violence associated with the gang</i>
Emergent	1989–92	Vigilantism; drunken fighting at bars; some individual crime and delinquency
Golden era	1993–98	Gang warfare; both individual and group crime and delinquency
Drug dealing	1999–2005	Collective violence to support local drug economy; drug-fuelled individual crime and delinquency;
Pacification	2006–11	Low levels of individual crime and delinquency (mainly drug-fuelled); absence of collective violence (absence of gang)
Revival	2012–	Increasing individual crime and delinquency; renewed collective forms of violence, including gang warfare

Source: Adapted from Rodgers and Rocha (2013: 53)

The socio-economic background of gang members has not changed significantly across these five different phases,<sup>20</sup> however, and nor has their gender, as all *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members have been young men in the post-conflict period, with one exception.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the gang's structure has evolved over time, both in terms of its size – it has ranged from having 14 members at its smallest to approximately 100 at its greatest extent<sup>22</sup> – as well as its organisation – it was for example highly hierarchical and stratified during

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<sup>20</sup> Gang members originate indiscriminately from richer and poorer neighbourhood households, and I have not found other stereotypical “determinants” or “risk factors” commonly reported as leading to gang membership, such as family fragmentation, domestic violence, parental alcoholism or migration, to be systematically significant. The only factor that has seemed to systematically prevent gang membership in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández during the course of my research is religious, insofar as there have been no evangelical Protestant youths in the neighbourhood gang. In many ways, this is hardly surprising since many of the activities associated with being a gang member – being violent, stealing, drinking, smoking, or taking drugs – are in direct contradiction with the tenets of evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, the totalising nature of evangelical Protestantism means that such churches often tend to provide a complete institutional and organisational framework for their members – much more so than the more diffusely dominant Catholic Church – thereby constituting an evident collective alternative to the gang for neighbourhood youth. At the same time, although the number of converts to evangelical Protestantism has been growing steadily in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández – and indeed, Nicaragua (Coleman and Stuart, 1997: 183) – since the 1970s, it does not constitute enough of an explanation by itself to account for gang membership in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, as no more than a quarter of the neighbourhood population is Protestant.

<sup>21</sup> The way gang members talked among themselves about women in belittling terms, as well as the fact that any young woman walking past the group was inevitably wolf-whistled and leered at – if not groped or assaulted when not from the *barrio* – clearly suggest that being a female gang member is not a conceptual option, as does, more broadly, the widespread *machismo* that pervades Nicaraguan society and provides an ideological “template” for accepted and acceptable male and female behaviour patterns. Certainly, the gang's gender bias can be at least partly associated with the fact that being a gang member involves behaviour patterns that revolve around activities associated with “ideals of manhood”, such as “taking risk [or] displaying bravado in the face of danger” (Lancaster, 1992: 195), and therefore inherently challenge Nicaraguan ideals of womanhood, which are associated with “subordination” and “domestic roles, especially mothering” (Montoya, 2003: 63). To this extent, being a gang member can be seen as the enactment of an exaggerated form of “hyper-masculinity”. At the same time, however, as Lancaster (1992: 19) has pointed out, *machismo* is very much “a field of productive relations”, and relations between men and women, and notions of what it is to properly be a man or a woman, are defined not just ideologically but also through practices that are interpreted and negotiated by variably positioned social agents. Female gang members are not unknown in Nicaragua, and the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang had a female gang member known as *la Gata* (the Cat) during the early 1990s. Although she was originally associated with the gang as a gang member's girlfriend, *la Gata* rapidly came to be considered a fully-fledged member of the gang in her own right. Her “femininity” was very obviously downplayed whenever gang members talked about her, however, as they invariably described her as having been extremely “violent”, “barbaric”, or “fearless”, qualities that fundamentally reflect the *machismo*-inspired ideal of what a gang member should be. To this extent, there was a certain “masculinisation” of her status, something that further points to the absence of female roles within the gang, and implicitly suggests that *la Gata* was something of an exception.

<sup>22</sup> The element of imprecision regarding the latter figure derives from the fact that the gang included both “core” and “peripheral” members at this point in time, which made achieving an accurate headcount difficult. The distinction was moreover implicit rather than explicit, and was based on the extent to which an individual participated regularly in gang activities or not, as well as the type of gang activities they participated in, including in particular violent ones. At the same time, the difference between core and peripheral membership was not absolutely clear-cut, as individuals who only sporadically spent time with other gang members but could always be counted on to participate

the “golden era”, but more egalitarian and organic during the “emergent” and “revival” phases, for example. Both the spread and median age of members have moreover also fluctuated, with the former for example ranging from 7 to 22 years of age during the “golden era” phase to 17 to 26 years of age during the “drug dealing” phase, while the latter varied from 19 years of age during the “emergent” phase to 15 years of age during the “revival” phase, for instance.

Such fluctuations across gang evolution phases can clearly also be related to the transformation of gang socialization processes. For example, the first post-conflict iteration of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang came to the fore in 1989, as a result of an epoch-specific development, namely the demographically contingent emergence of a larger than normal peer group of demobilized *Sandinista* Popular Army conscripts in the neighbourhood. A group of eight youths aged between 18 and 20 years old were demobilized more or less simultaneously that year, rather than the more usual one or two who would finish their military term together during previous years of conscription. These eight individuals began to hang out together on a neighbourhood street corner, along with four slightly older youths aged between 20 and 23 years old who had also been conscripts, as well as two younger individuals aged respectively 9 and 10 years old who gravitated to the group for idiosyncratic reasons, and were accepted by the others in something of a mascot-like manner (see Rodgers, 2010). This rather organic and initially very fluid assembly rapidly became a regular feature of the neighbourhood panorama that was quickly labelled a “gang” (*pandilla*), both by its members as well as inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández more generally, particular once the members of the group began to engage regularly in a range of violent activities.

Most of this violence was vigilante in nature and involved beating up individuals who had robbed, attacked, or threatened the friends or family of gang members, something that happened frequently in the post-war context of heightened flux and uncertainty that characterised Nicaragua in the early 1990s. This brutality occurred principally within the neighbourhood, but

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in violent activities were considered core gang members, as were some others who spent a lot of time hanging out with fellow gang members but rarely participated in collective violence – although the latter tended to be older members of the gang who had already “proven” themselves, so to speak. Generally, however, there was little ambiguity as to whether an individual was a gang member, irrespective of whether they were core or peripheral. This categorization was both internally sanctioned by other gang members as well as externally ascribed by the wider *barrio* population, who recognised the gang as a specific, bounded social group involving a limited number of individuals.

the gang also rapidly began to fight other local gangs at popular local nightclubs and bars on Friday and Saturday nights, however for reasons unrelated to their incipient vigilante ethos but rather tied to drinking and macho posturing. These fights generally only involved fists and stones but could also escalate to include knives and broken bottles. Firearms were also used occasionally, although their role in such brawls often became mythologized, especially during the recounting of events by gang members to non-gang members afterwards. Finally, most of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members also began to engage in petty crime and delinquency on an individual basis, or in small groups of two or three, but they generally tended to do so outside the neighbourhood, partly to avoid being recognized, but also because they felt that it was not appropriate to attack local inhabitants.

The impulse for most of these different violent activities was clearly related to norms and practices acquired by the demobilized conscript members of the gang during their time in the *Sandinista* Popular Army.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, individual gang members from this period whom I interviewed *ex post facto* all systematically highlighted three basic reasons for forming a gang and acting as they did, all of which were related to their experiences as conscripts. Firstly, the change of regime in 1990 had led to an abrupt reduction of their social status. Their role as conscripts “defending the nation” had previously been held in very high esteem in their community, and forming a gang and being violent had offered them a means of reaffirming their status vis-à-vis a wider society that seemed to forget them very rapidly in the post-conflict period. Secondly, becoming a gang member had been a way for them to recapture some of the adrenaline-charged energy of war, while also reconstituting a comradeship and solidarity reminiscent of their wartime experiences as conscripts. But perhaps most importantly, they saw becoming gang members as a natural continuation of their previous role as soldiers. The early 1990s had been highly uncertain times, marked by political polarization, violence, and spiralling insecurity, and these youths felt they could better “serve” their families and friends by joining a gang than attempting to “protect” them as individuals (see Rodgers, 2006a: 283–84).

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<sup>23</sup> In some neighbourhood, the gangs were formed by demobilized *Contra* youth (see Rodgers, 2006a: 283). It is important to note that not all demobilized youths – whether *Contra* or *Sandinista* – joined gangs, partly because the overwhelming majority were from rural areas. A clear majority of demobilized youths who came from poor urban neighbourhoods ended up joining gangs, however.

This particular discourse points to the existence of a distinctive normative framework principally derived from the experience – both individual and collective – of having been a conscript. From around 1992 onwards, however, the demobilized members of the first post-war iteration of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang began to “mature out” of the gang.<sup>24</sup> They were replaced by new members, most of whom were initially siblings or kin of existing or recently “retired” gang members. This particular recruitment channel was however rapidly superseded, and by the mid-1990s the gang had approximately 100 members, most of whom had no direct links to the first generation of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members. Most joined the gang organically, hanging out with existing gang members over a prolonged period of time, being gradually drawn into the gang’s activities, although this was by no means an inevitable outcome.<sup>25</sup> Socialization is of course a two-way process – it is not just the individual who decides whether to join the gang, but also the gang that decides whether to accept the individual. Over the years there have been many instances of “wannabe” gang members who were rejected by existing gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández for reasons ranging from “they don’t have the *onda* (ethos)” to “they would be useless in a fight”, for example. Indeed, in this latter respect, initiation rituals – similar to the ones I underwent (see Rodgers, 2007b) – were in fact generally reserved for youth who had arrived in the neighbourhood relatively recently, although there were occasions when existing gang members would informally “test” the fighting skills of a local prospective gang member, something that could plausibly be construed as a form of initiation, although it was not regarded as such by gang members.

Unlike the demobilized conscript group that had constituted the core of the first *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, there was no clear common experiential background to the new wave of youth joining the gang in the mid-1990s, apart from living in the neighbourhood. Having said this, there were approximately 700 male youths falling within the potential gang member age-range in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in late 1996, and the gang only involved

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<sup>24</sup> Gang member has generally been found to be a finite social role all over the world (see Covey, 2003; Hazen and Rodgers, 2014). Certainly, *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members from all epochs would often tell me that “there is no such thing as an old gang member”, and “maturing out” was considered the natural course of things, although the age at which this happened has varied in the neighbourhood during the past decades.

<sup>25</sup> Gang members were part of the broader neighbourhood youth socialisation scene, and interacted regularly with a range of non-gang member youth without the latter necessarily being drawn into the gang.

some 15 percent of these at its peak. The reasons for this limited pattern of gang membership were by no means evident, but in many ways this is not necessarily surprising. As Johnson-Hanks (2002: 865) has argued, “most vital life events are rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome”, and we need to recognize “this indeterminacy”. Certainly, conversations with youth who joined the gang around this time revealed their decision to be hugely “contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence”, to the extent that it would very likely have been different under distinct circumstances, or had the opportunity simply presented itself at an alternative point in time. The same was also true of non-gang members and their motivations for not joining the gang.

At the same time, while none of the new gang members had any experience of serving as conscripts, the norms and particular violent practices of the first wave of (now former) gang members nevertheless continued to influence the new generation, albeit in a transformed manner. In particular, the vigilantism of the first post-conflict incarnation of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, which was based on the individual experience of the majority of its ex-conscript members, transformed into a more collective territorial-based form of vigilantism – that is, the vigilante impulse derived from belonging to the neighbourhood rather than the experience of having been a conscript, “defending the Nation”. This also affected the violent practices of the gang. While the first gang’s vigilante violence had been rather *ad hoc* in nature, and principally aimed at individuals, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s mid-1990s iteration displayed very different dynamics and logic. In particular, it now revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, with fighting generally specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both neighbourhood infrastructure and inhabitants, as well as injuring or killing symbolically important gang members.

As I have described in detail elsewhere (Rodgers, 2006a), this new brutality involved semi-ritualised forms of gang warfare that rigidly obeyed a number of precise rules and practices that principally derived from local territorial concerns.<sup>26</sup> At first glance, the motivation offered

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<sup>26</sup> Some could be linked to the military heritage of the first generation of gang members, however. Gang members in the mid-1990s, for example, never went into battle against other gangs drunk or high on drugs, maintaining quite rightly that this reduced their fighting capabilities. This echoed a similar norm proscribing drinking on combat duty that was maintained by *Sandinista* guerrillas during the years of revolutionary insurrection (for a literary allusion to

by gang members in the mid-1990s for their particular behaviour pattern seemed to be directly linked to the original post-conflict *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members' conscript ethos – or at least the element of it associable with *Sandinismo*. Certainly, all the current gang members I interviewed in 1996–97 actively and repeatedly claimed to be “the last inheritors of *Sandinismo*”, contending that they had joined the gang and engaged in violence due to their “love” – literally, “*querer*” – for their local neighbourhood. “We show our love for the neighbourhood by fighting other gangs”, a gang member called Miguel asserted for example, while another called Julio told me that “you show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other gangs.... You look after the neighbourhood in that way, you help them, keep them safe”.

A conceptual parallel can be made here with the “love” that Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1969: 398) saw as the mark of “the true revolutionary”, an analogy that is all the more relevant considering the strong associations between *Sandinismo* and the “Cult of Che” (see Lancaster, 1988: 132 and 185). This was something that came out particularly strongly in relation to conscripts and “martyrs of the Revolution”, both of whom were seen to epitomize the Guevaran “love of the people”. *Barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members in the mid-1990s were motivated by a more narrow form of affection, however. This emerged very clearly one morning in October 1996, when I chanced across Julio during a stroll around the neighbourhood. He was cleaning up a graffito from the 1980s that extolled the virtues of the *Sandinista* youth organization, and which a person or persons unknown had crudely painted over in bright red – the colours of the anti-*Sandinista* Constitutionalist Liberal Party – the night before. As Julio angrily berated the “*hijos de la setenta mil putas*” (“sons of seventy thousand whores”) who had done this, I initially assumed that this was just one more exemplification of his overt *Sandinista* sympathies, but it quickly became apparent that he saw this act of vandalism less as an attack on

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this, see Sepúlveda, 1997). Gang members also fought their wars in a highly strategic manner. They organised themselves into “companies”, there was generally a “reserve force”, and although weapons were an individual's own property, each gang member was distributed amongst the different “companies” in order to balance out fire-power, except when a high-powered “attack commando” was needed for a specific tactical purpose. In addition, the ritualised nature of gang warfare arguably reproduced the frequently “predictable” nature of engagements between the *Sandinista* Popular Army and *Contras* units during the 1980s, when each side often knew where the other was located, and could “choose” whether to engage each other or not.



*Sandinismo* and more as a desecration of a material manifestation of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández's identity:

Those *jodidos* [assholes] don't respect anything in the neighbourhood, Dennis, nothing! OK, so they don't like *Sandinismo*, that's how it is, I don't like their politics either, but this is more than just a *Sandinista pinta* [graffiti], it's a part of the neighbourhood history. Our history, *bróder*! It's something that belongs to the community, to all of us; it shows us who we are, where we come from, how *Sandinismo* built our houses and made us into a community. It shows what the neighbourhood is, and people should therefore respect it, whatever their political opinions.

To this extent, although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members' discursive *Sandinista* sympathies in the mid-1990s at first glance seems associable with the first generation gang members' experiences of conscription and their sense of "defending the Revolution" at the end of the 1980s, in practice it arguably reflected something very different, namely a more localised, territorial sense of identity. As Bauman (1998: 117) has described it:

in an ever more insecure and uncertain world the withdrawal into the safe haven of territoriality is an intense temptation... [T]he defence of the territory – the "safe home" – becomes the pass-key to all doors which one feels must be locked to stave off the...threat to spiritual and material comfort.

This new "pass-key" became a critical underpinning to gang socialization in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández during the mid-1990s, as it moved from being principally based on belonging to a particular peer group that shared a common experience to the experience of being associated with a particular territory. Because *Sandinismo* was a major element of the neighbourhood's identity, the gang members claimed to be *Sandinista*, but this did not represent any form of "big-P" political allegiance derived from individual conscientization, but rather a "small-p" form of politics, based on a more unconscious embodiment of particular circumstances. This clearly suggests that the gang at this point developed an institutional autonomy from any particular individual membership traits.

Having said this, the two younger mascot-like members of the first neighbourhood gang remained as members of its second incarnation, and played an active role in ensuring certain continuities between the two iterations of the gang. These however principally concerned practices rather than norms. In particular, these two individuals, Milton and Bismarck, played an

important role in facilitating the transmission of certain types of violent practices that were directly linked to the conscript experiences of the first post-war generation of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members, namely concerning the use of firearms. Guns have of course long been associated with gangs; as Arendt (1969: 4) famously pointed out, violence “always needs implements”. The use of firearms however requires specialized knowledge. Guns are by no means intuitive, as a former gang member called Jorge highlighted during the course of an interview in July 2012, when he recounted the first time that he had tried to use a gun in the early 1990s:

I was 13-14 years old....The gun was my father's, he'd brought it back from military service after the war. He kept it locked in a drawer, but whenever he'd get drunk, he'd take it out, and wave it at the neighbours, pretending to shoot them. One day, I broke into the drawer and took the gun, you know, to go and mug somebody. I'd been hanging around with the gang, you see, and the day before one of them got a really nice pair of Nike shoes by pulling a gun on some rich kid, and I thought “why don't I get myself some nice shoes too”, and so went to the *Colonia* Las Condes with the gun to find somebody to hold up. It didn't go as planned, though, as the guy I tried to rob refused to give up his shoes. When I tried to shoot him, nothing happened, because the safety catch was on! I was so dumb, I didn't know that guns had safety catches then, and so I just dropped the gun and ran away, because he was much bigger than me. I can laugh about it now, but I was scared shitless....You know what the worse thing was, though? I lost the gun, and so my father really beat me up afterwards....

The first generation of gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández either obtained their specialized knowledge about guns directly, during their military service, or they were taught by a gang member who had done military service. Bismarck, for example, who had no military experience, described the learning process in this way in an interview in July 2012:

We were taught how to use firearms by the gang members who had done their military service....They showed us how to load guns, how to shoot them, how to strip and clean them.

Although the ex-conscript members of the first *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang had all matured out by 1992, the fact that Bismarck and Milton continued as gang members meant that they acted as bridges for the transmission of this specialized knowledge, along with more general notions about fighting, as the following extract from my field diary illustrates well:

Today I was interviewing Milton when he suddenly interrupted our conversation to summon over Chucki, who was passing by. “Oye Chucki,” he shouted, “*venivé*, I want to show you something.” Chucki duly sauntered up to us, only to be knocked hard to the ground when Milton sucker-punched him in the balls. Writhing in pain, Chucki screamed “why the fuck did you do that, *hijuéputa?*”, to which Milton coolly replied, “because you’ve got to learn, *maje*, you’re new to the gang and you don’t know anything yet.” He then turned to me, and said, “*ves*, Dennis, that’s how you teach the young ones. They’ve got to learn how to take it and to be prepared for anything. Otherwise they don’t last long. That’s how I learnt after I joined the gang, from the older *bróderes* (brothers) – they taught me how to fight, how to defend myself, all that kind of stuff....Now that I’m one of the older guys and I know what I’m doing, it’s my job to teach the new guys....” (Field notes, 4 December 1996)

This kind of behaviour however quickly spread beyond Bismarck and Milton, and can even be said to have become institutionalised following the gang’s sub-division into distinct age groups during the mid-1990s.

Although the transmission process continued across successive generations of gang members, there clearly occurred something of a “Chinese whispers” effect as the temporal distance increased from the generation that had had professional or near-professional training, particularly with regards to firearms use. Milton and Bismarck both “retired” from the gang, respectively in 1997 and 1999, which meant that knowledge about guns in the late 1990s began to be acquired third- or fourth-hand by new gang members. This significantly affected its quality, as was apparent from the way that the number of gang members suffering firearms accidents soared in the late 1990s compared to the early and mid-1990s. In an interview in February 2002, Bismarck explicitly linked the rising number of accidents to the fact that gang members did not always understand how to use or care for their weapons, often unintentionally shooting themselves or others. “Gang members nowadays don’t take proper care of their weapons, so they’re breaking down all the time, sometimes even blowing up in their face,” he told me, before then going on to discuss the case of a young gang member who had recently shot himself in the foot:

He had no idea what he was doing. He'd got this pistol, and thought that made him a *poderoso* (big man), but you know, you've got to know how to use a gun to be able to do something with it. He shot himself because he put it in his belt without the security turned on....The problem was that he hadn't had proper training, because there's nobody left in the gang who really knows, and so he'd only half understood things, or hadn't been told properly, and that's why he shot himself.

In the early 2000s, though, there was a renewal of gang member knowledge about firearms use in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. This was due to a single individual, an ex-gang member from the mid-1990s called Jhon, who spent five years in the Nicaraguan Army and had been extensively trained in a variety of weapons systems. He had joined the neighbourhood gang in 1994 at the age of 13 but was sent to the Army by his family in 1997 because they could “no longer cope with him” and hoped that it would “educate him”, as his mother Doña Aurora put it in an interview in July 2007. After he returned to the neighbourhood in 2002, Jhon re-joined the gang and his expertise in weapons critically transformed the levels of gang member knowledge about guns, as he explained during the course of an interview in July 2012:

[The Army is] where I learnt to use firearms, the AK-47, the sniper rifle, the RPG – which is a rocket-launcher – all kinds of weapons! I had classes, it was like school, and they taught us to shoot, to strip and clean our weapons, and there were also exams. I can strip and re-assemble any kind of weapon – I know everything, I tell you! The basic weapon in the Army was the AK-47, but because I could shoot really well, I became a sniper, and so used a special rifle. I went and trained in Martinique and Marie-Galante, they're French islands, and I trained with the French Army and also the Venezuelan Army....All of this helped me when I came back to the neighbourhood afterwards.... During my service I'd come back every 15 days, and whenever I came, all the *bróderes* would say, “bring me a gun, *mon*, bring me an AK”, but I'd just say to them, “*oye maje*, do you know how to use a gun?” I'd tell them that I wasn't going to bring anything if they didn't know how to take care of their guns, if they couldn't strip and re-assemble them. I told them that they needed to learn all of this, and so they asked me to teach them. So after a while, I brought back an AK-47 and taught them all, in groups of five....You see, an AK-47 isn't complicated, but there's a specific order you have to follow to strip it in order to be able to clean it. The first thing you do is release the magazine catch, then you remove the magazine, then you cock the rifle, and – then – you take off the receiver cover and the recoil mechanism....Then you remove the bolt carrier and then the bolt, and then you release the catch on the right side of the rear sight, and take off the hand guard, and then all that's left is the skeleton, which you clean. Afterwards, to re-assemble it, you just put everything back together in the reverse order.

Between 2002 and 2005, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang – perhaps unsurprisingly – became one of the most feared gangs in the southeast of Managua due to its highly effective deployment of violence as a result of Jhon’s training, highlighting very well how a very specific channel of gang socialization can change for very contingent – and individual – reasons. Jhon retired from the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang in 2004, and indeed it is clear from all the interviews that I have carried out with other gang members from this epoch that knowledge acquisition about guns lost focus once again as a result. At the same time, however, more exogenous factors arguably affected gang socialization processes much more critically at this time. These were linked to the development of a local drug economy in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which began to emerge from around 2000 onwards (see Rodgers, 2006a; 2007b; 2007c). This activity was initially organized in a rather *ad hoc* and informal manner, but steadily professionalized, and by 2005, it was being run in along more exclusive lines by a shadowy group referred to locally as the *cartelito* (“little cartel”). Although some of the members of the *cartelito* were former gang members, and the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang was initially enrolled by local drug dealers as a security apparatus during the early years of the drug economy’s development, the *cartelito* rapidly became violently antagonistic vis-à-vis the gang and sought to suppress it.

In 2006, after a series of violent confrontations that left several gang members critically injured and one dead – executed in cold blood “as a warning to the others”, as his killer Mayuyu, an ex-gang member who had joined the *cartelito*, put it in an interview in July 2012 – the gang effectively ceased to exist as a collective unit in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. Although local youths still hung out individually or in small groups of two or three in the neighbourhood streets, local inhabitants generally identified them as “*chavalos vagos*” (delinquent youths) rather than “*pandilleros*” (gang members). Moreover, the *cartelito* sought to consolidate its domination over the neighbourhood by arbitrarily intimidating local residents, including in particular, violently preventing local youths from congregating on street corners in large groups, something that can effectively be seen as a form of reverse gang socialization.

By 2009, however, the *cartelito* began to reduce its involvement in local drug-dealing activities, refocusing instead on drug trafficking, mainly because this is intrinsically a much

more lucrative activity. This opened up a space for a *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang “revival”, as the *cartelito* no longer sought to dominate the neighbourhood but rather aimed to be as invisible as possible. By mid-2012, a group of a dozen 14–15 year olds was regularly coming together, hanging out on local street corners, effectively (re)occupying the socio-spatial vacuum left by the *cartelito*’s withdrawal. The main forms of violence associated with these youths were a variety of petty criminal activities, which they generally carried out on an individual basis, but in July 2012 they acted for the first time as a group, attacking the local gang in a nearby neighbourhood. Although they were repelled, and several individuals were injured – two of them critically – this event led to the beginning of a perception in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández that “the gang is back”, as an inhabitant called *Doña* Yolanda put it. At the same time, however, the logic for attacking the other neighbourhood’s gang had been revenge rather than any territorial impulse or profit-seeking, and to this extent the new generation of gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández could be construed as having assimilated little in the way of the norms and practices associated with the past incarnations of the gang.

## Concluding thoughts

This paper has sought to explore the various ways in which gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor urban neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, have assimilated and put into practice a range of violent behaviour patterns over the past two decades. It has shown how different types of violence can be related to distinct forms of socialization, and traces how some of these articulations change over time, often for very contingent reasons including individual idiosyncrasies, for example. But while some of the forms of socialization explored were clearly based on individual agency, others derived from collective group dynamics, while yet others were more broadly contextual in nature. These different institutional “channels” for gang socialization however all permitted both the internalization of norms as well as the learning of particular practices – or what Checkel (2011: 13) has labelled “type I” vs. “type II” socialization – relating to violence. At the same time, however, these different channels and different types of socialization intertwined in variable ways that caused a range of different outcomes at different points in time.

As such, the paper highlights the need to conceive of gang socialization as both a dynamic and contextualized process, one that is effectively based on the existence of a wide “repertoire” of possible types of social actions that then come together in a range of possible manners. I purposefully borrow the notion of “repertoire” from Hannerz (1969), who explicitly developed it against the then widespread concept of “subculture”, which he felt was both static, and not properly reflective of the complex ways in which cultural dynamics operated. Drawing on his ethnographic research in an African-American ghetto in Washington, DC, Hannerz showed how the cultural universe of ghetto inhabitants – which he termed their “cultural repertoire” – was not just limited to a putative “black subculture” but included many so-called “mainstream” elements, and individuals drew on these in a situationally variable manner, depending on their interlocutors, context, and location. His invocation of the notion of a “repertoire” emphasized both the fluidity and wide-ranging nature of cultural reference points, and allowed for a more nuanced understanding of ghetto life.

Although Hannerz’s conceptual approach can be criticized for perhaps emphasizing actor agency too much, his notion that cultural reference points are drawn upon variably, in different situations, as well as according to whom is being interacted with and when, is a potentially powerful way to represent socialization in a more dynamic manner. There is a sense in which the socialization process is more often than not considered rather monolithically and in a singular manner. This is certainly the case of gang socialization, which is in fact generally viewed as a static event rather than a process (see e.g. Vigil, 2002; Melde and Esbensen, 2011). The material presented above on gang socialization in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández clearly goes against the grain of such a notion, highlighting instead how different forms and types of socialization articulate together variably in a constantly evolving and contingent manner that is a function of changing individual, group, and contextual factors. Seen from this perspective, thinking of these through the “repertoire” lens potentially provides us with both a better sense of how socialization actually works, but also inherently highlights it as both multifarious and dynamic.

In many ways, this is not surprising, especially when thinking about gang socialization. As Mannheim (1952 [1923]) pointed out in his famous analysis of “the sociology of generations”, each successive age cohort encounters the world simultaneously, and this common

experience shapes them as a collective unit. But the specific lived experience of each generation is inevitably different from that of previous generations, because experience is not a straightforwardly cumulative process but a contextually contingent articulation – and, in some cases, reinterpretation – of preceding practices and attitudes. This is very much what the evolutionary trajectory of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang illustrates, with different gang member generations in the post-conflict period dynamically experiencing different forms and articulations of socialization that are contextually contingent but draw on a repertoire of both old and new elements.

A final consideration in favour of the notion of “repertoire” is that it also allows for a better apprehension of another aspect of gang socialization that the material presented in this paper highlights very well but that is rarely considered – namely, that socialization is not necessarily a linear process. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s practices of violence have for example clearly waxed and waned in intensity over the past two decades. This can be related to certain specific dynamics of gang socialization, including the fact that while certain practices of violence relating to the use of firearms adopted by gang members in the neighbourhood were temporally less stable, they also seemed to re-emerge more easily, whereas the internalization of particular norms seems to be highly dependent on the existence of continuities between different iterations of the gang, with disjunctures – often precipitated by exogenous factors – leading to major normative shifts. Ultimately, though, from a more practical point of view, the non-linear nature of gang socialization is perhaps the most important aspect of the process to understand if we are to tackle it effectively.



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